

St Nicholas Catholic High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111450
Local Authority	Cheshire West and Chester
Inspection number	356916
Inspection dates	6–7 July 2011
Reporting inspector	Joan Davis HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1211
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	235
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Jonathan Reid
Headteacher	Mr Keiran Kelly
Date of previous school inspection	6 July 2011
School address	Greenbank Lane Hartford, Northwich Cheshire CW8 1JW
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. Teaching and learning were observed in 36 lessons and 35 teachers were seen. Meetings were held with groups of students, staff and members of the governing body. The inspection team examined the school's self-evaluation of its work, the school development plan, students' work and data on their current performance, minutes of meetings, and policies. Inspectors also considered an analysis of 344 parents' and carers' questionnaires as well as those from students and staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- To what extent all students in the school meet or exceed challenging targets set for their performance.
- The effectiveness of the school's actions to eradicate the relative underperformance of some girls and students known to be eligible for free school meals.

Information about the school

St Nicholas Catholic High School is a larger-than-average school. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below the national average, as is the proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is below the national average, as is the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language. The school has specialist status for Business and Enterprise and the Raising Achievement and Leading Edge Partnership programmes. St Nicholas High School has received several awards including the Inclusion Quality Mark, the Healthy Schools Award and the International Schools Award.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

St Nicholas Catholic High is an outstanding school. There has been a rising trend of attainment since the previous inspection and data provided by the school on current performance suggest that this has not only been sustained but, indeed, improved upon. Learning and progress are good for most groups across the school, including for those students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Students' achievement is therefore outstanding.

The school provides a warm and welcoming environment in which all students are valued. Students appreciate the outstanding care, guidance and support they receive; as one student commented, about the staff in the school, 'They'll always take that extra step to support us.' Procedures for safeguarding are good and the overwhelming majority of students say that they feel safe in the school. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Students make an outstanding contribution to the school and the wider community and are encouraged to care for others less fortunate than themselves. The extent to which students develop workplace skills is also outstanding, as is the extent to which students adopt healthy lifestyles. Attendance is well above the national average. Behaviour is good and movement around the school is orderly. Students are welcoming, courteous and show consideration for one another. They say that there is very little bullying and when it occurs it is dealt with effectively.

The quality of teaching is good overall. Students show enthusiasm for their studies and relationships between students and teachers are good. For the most part, teachers use information and communication technology effectively to support students' learning.

The use of assessment to support learning is satisfactory and the school acknowledges that this is an area for development. On occasion, teachers do not use to best effect the assessment information available when planning lessons. As a result activities are not always matched sufficiently to the needs and abilities of students. Marking is inconsistent and students do not always receive clear advice on how to improve their work.

The curriculum is outstanding and contributes highly effectively to improving outcomes in achievement. The impact of the specialism on all aspects of the school's work has been extremely beneficial, providing students with opportunities for a wealth of memorable experiences. In addition, the specialism has led the way in introducing a variety of vocational courses which better meet the needs, interests and abilities of some learners. The school leads, and is involved in, many highly effective partnerships both locally and further afield. As a result the effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being is outstanding.

Leadership, management and governance are good. The headteacher, who has been in post since September 2009, has shown clarity of vision and ambition for the further

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development of the school. He is ably supported by a knowledgeable and astute governing body. Governors have a clear grasp of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and are effective in holding the school to account. Self-evaluation is broadly accurate and improvements that have been implemented are now starting to have an impact on outcomes for students. As a result the school's capacity for sustained improvement is good. The school provides outstanding value for money and deploys resources effectively.

The school's contribution to community cohesion is good, as is the effectiveness with which the school promotes equal opportunities and tackles discrimination.

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is good. Leadership and management of the sixth form are satisfactory. Systems are now in place to monitor and evaluate provision. However, these procedures lack rigour and, as a consequence, areas of underperformance have not been tackled sufficiently robustly.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Disseminate, embed and develop existing good practice in the use of assessment to support learning by:
 - - ensuring that all teachers use information available to plan stimulating, challenging lessons that better meet the needs, abilities and interests of all students
 - - insisting that marking is regular and provides clear guidance to students on how to improve their work.
- Introduce more rigorous procedures for monitoring and evaluating performance in the sixth form that are clearly focused on improving outcomes for students.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

Students enter the school with prior attainment that is above average. They make good progress as they move up through the school and their performance at the end of Key Stage 4 is well-above average for all key indicators. The school recognises that for a very small minority of students learning and progress have lagged behind those of their peers. The school has put in place a number of initiatives to address this comparative underperformance but the impact of the school's actions in this respect is yet to be seen. The learning and progress of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are good. Intervention and support are used highly effectively to secure good outcomes for these students. Progress in lessons observed during the inspection was good overall.

Almost all students feel safe in the school. They trust staff and feel that they can confide in them should problems arise. Behaviour is good, allowing lessons to proceed productively. The number of exclusions is low. Students have an excellent appreciation of the need to adopt healthy lifestyles and there is a higher-than-average take-up of school meals. Opportunities to participate in extra-curricular sport, both in school and through links with sports' clubs, are appreciated by students. Students assume responsibilities willingly and play a substantial role in the community, supporting both local and international charities. Workplace skills are outstanding. Literacy and numeracy skills are well-developed and all students in Year 11 have achieved a good grade in an external examination in information and communication technology. The specialism contributes highly effectively to this area of the school's work. For example, some students are

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working with a local business to design a website. This allows students to acquire experience of the world of work and in addition, the opportunity to apply their skills in a 'real life' context. Attendance is well-above average and students' punctuality, as observed during the inspection, is exemplary.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Students have the opportunity to reflect on ethical issues both in lessons and on retreats. For example, in a Year 10 form period observed during the inspection, students were encouraged by the teacher to reflect upon the need to treat other people in the way one would like to be treated oneself. Students appreciate the many opportunities afforded by the school to attend visits that deepen their appreciation of cultural diversity.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	1
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	1
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

The quality of teaching is good overall. In the best lessons, teachers plan a range of challenging activities that engage and enthuse learners. These lessons are well-constructed, imaginative and characterised by high expectations and a clear sense of purpose. For example, in one outstanding chemistry lesson observed during the inspection, students were provided with excellent opportunities to solve problems, thereby extending their knowledge and developing independent learning skills. However, some inconsistency in the quality of teaching is evident. In weaker lessons, activities lack variety

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and sufficient challenge. On occasion, too much talk from the teacher leads to a lack of engagement on the part of students.

The use of assessment to support learning is satisfactory. Good practice exists but opportunities are missed to share expertise. The quality of marking is variable and students are not always clear as to what they need to do to improve their work. Teachers do not always use assessment information in order to plan lessons to suit the needs of learners. As a consequence, activities that are planned are not correctly pitched and take little account of prior learning. In some lessons, questioning lacks depth and, as a result, students do not always have the opportunity to develop their responses and thereby extend their learning.

The school has developed an outstanding curriculum. Tailored provision is available for all learners in both key stages. There is a wide range of traditional subjects and an increasing variety of vocational courses. The curriculum has contributed highly effectively to improved outcomes for students. An excellent range of extra-curricular opportunities exists. 'Business Challenge' days allow students to take part in a variety of exciting activities. For example, all Year 9 students participate in an 'Ethical Trading Day', a cross-curricular project involving the art, technology and business departments. Students discuss the impact of the desire for cheap clothing on the working conditions of people in the developing world. They bring in their old clothes, make new ones, put on a fashion show, sell the clothes and give the money raised to a charity to help people less fortunate than themselves, in Africa, to start small businesses.

The effectiveness of care, guidance and support is outstanding. Support is highly tailored to individual needs throughout the school. The move from primary school is particularly well supported. Equally, throughout the school, students benefit from high-quality advice and guidance on possible routes for the next stages in their lives. Students speak highly of the school's work in this respect, as do parents and carers; as one parent commented, 'The care and support given to my son and my family was exceptional.'

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher has effectively communicated his vision for the further development of the school. He has acted swiftly to put in place systems to monitor performance, establishing clear lines of accountability linked directly to improved outcomes for students. He has driven innovation in many aspects of the school's work and the school is now beginning to see the benefit of such initiatives.

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The leadership and management of teaching and learning are good. Systems are in place to monitor provision, and training has had a sharp focus on improving the quality of teaching. However, the school does not as yet provide sufficient opportunities to share existing good practice so that all lessons may be as good as the best.

The school is supported by a capable governing body. Governors are in the process of establishing productive links with departments. The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers is good. Governors are working with the school to explore ways in which channels of communication with parents and carers may be improved.

The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being is outstanding. Such partnerships have led to improved provision and outcomes for students, for example, in increasing the range of courses and accreditation available. A highly effective partnership with a local car manufacturer has led to students finding placements on the Modern Apprenticeship scheme, thereby improving their prospects for future employment.

The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion is good. The school itself is a highly cohesive community and it reaches out to others who are less fortunate in many areas of the world. The effectiveness with which the school tackles discrimination and promotes equal opportunities is good. Students are encouraged to appreciate diversity through the curriculum and many other activities. The school is now addressing the comparative underperformance of a very small minority of students.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Sixth form

Students enter the sixth form with higher-than-average prior attainment. They make good progress during their time in the sixth form and attainment for many students at the end

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of Years 12 and 13 is very high. There is no discernible disparity in performance between groups of students. However, there is variability in performance across subjects. The school has high levels of retention and most students go on to higher education. Students' attendance is above average. Students in the sixth form make a valuable contribution to the wider life of the school, for example, delivering assemblies and supporting younger students with their reading. Students feel they have ample opportunity to acquire skills that will equip them well for life and the next stages in their education. They work cooperatively and productively in lessons, enjoying good relationships with both teachers and their peers. Learning and progress, as seen in lessons observed during the inspection, are good overall.

The quality of teaching in the sixth form is good. Teachers have very good subject knowledge and often employ probing questioning techniques which encourage students to think independently and deepen their grasp of concepts. The best lessons are characterised by substantial challenge, intellectual rigour and a clear sense of purpose. The curriculum is well matched to the needs and aspirations of most students, who also appreciate the many extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities available. The school identifies the provision of further vocational courses to be an area for development. Students speak highly of the care, guidance and support that they receive and there are regular reviews of progress against targets.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. Systems exist to monitor performance of students but comparative weaknesses in the performance of some subjects have not been tackled with sufficient rigour. Targets are set for students but they are not sufficiently challenging. Planning for improvement requires development and the school does not at present have a governor with specific responsibility for the sixth form.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

Views of parents and carers

There was a higher-than-average return to the Ofsted questionnaire. Parents and carers are very supportive of the school and most say that their children enjoy school and that it meets their children's needs. Most parents and carers feel that the school informs them well of their children's progress and that their children are making enough progress. Most parents and carers feel that the teaching is good at the school and that the school helps them to support their children's learning.

A very small minority of parents and carers expressed concerns about behaviour. Inspectors found behaviour to be good during the inspection and that the school has appropriate systems in place to manage poor behaviour should it occur. A few parents and carers raised concerns regarding bullying, but when inspectors spoke to groups of

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students they said that bullying is rare and when it occurs it is dealt with effectively. Some parents and carers raised issues regarding communication with the school, and inspectors found that this is an area for development. The school acknowledges weaknesses in this respect and is exploring ways in which channels of communication may be improved.

Most parents and carers feel that the school is led and managed effectively and a very large majority are happy with their children's experience at St Nicholas Catholic High School.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at St Nicholas Catholic High School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 344 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1211 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	124	36	189	55	22	6	5	1
The school keeps my child safe	160	47	176	51	2	1	2	1
My school informs me about my child's progress	101	29	205	60	27	8	8	2
My child is making enough progress at this school	121	35	189	55	23	7	5	1
The teaching is good at this school	112	33	198	58	15	4	4	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	83	24	200	58	43	13	3	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	67	19	217	63	39	11	8	2
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	115	33	183	53	19	6	7	2
The school meets my child's particular needs	114	33	187	54	25	7	5	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	97	28	200	58	25	7	11	3
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	69	20	194	56	43	13	3	1
The school is led and managed effectively	95	28	197	57	28	8	5	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	133	39	182	53	16	5	7	2

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	48	6	0
Primary schools	6	47	40	7
Secondary schools	12	39	38	11
Sixth forms	13	42	41	3
Special schools	28	49	19	4
Pupil referral units	14	45	31	10
All schools	10	46	37	7

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 December 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



8 July 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of St Nicholas Catholic High School, Northwich, CW8 1JW

Thank you very much for the warm welcome we received during our inspection of your school. We were impressed by your friendliness, the kindness you show towards one another and the way in which you respect each other's differences. We found that your school provides you with an outstanding quality of education. Many of you enjoy taking part in the life of the school and you make an outstanding contribution to your local community. You care deeply for people less fortunate than yourselves in other parts of the world and participate in many activities to raise money for charity.

You make good progress as you move up through the school and attainment at the end of Year 11 and Year 13 is well-above average.

Teaching is good overall. We noticed that you enjoyed lessons that are imaginative and challenging. Your behaviour is good and you are very polite. The school cares for you well and you trust your teachers. You know you can talk to them if you have a problem.

We have identified a number of areas where we think the school should make improvements. We have asked the headteacher to ensure that all teachers mark your work regularly and give you clear advice on how to improve. We have also asked him to ensure that all lessons are designed to include interesting and stimulating activities that meet your individual needs and abilities. We have asked the headteacher to monitor more effectively the performance of different subjects in the sixth form so that all subjects do as well as the best.

All of you can help in the further improvement of your school by maintaining your excellent attendance record, continuing to work hard and taking advantage of the many opportunities available to you.

We wish you every success for the future.

Yours sincerely

Joan Davis

Her Majesty's Inspector (on behalf of the inspection team)

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